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Loudoun supervisors, School Board address community concerns at joint town hall



Thursday, Feb. 4, 2016 by Hannah Dellinger, Times-Mirror Staff Writer | 3 comments | Email this story

Nearly 100 parents and community members gathered Wednesday night for a joint town hall meeting to ask members of the School Board and Board of Supervisors questions about Loudoun governance and public education.

The town hall, hosted by the Loudoun Education Alliance of Parents (LEAP), the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) and the Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee (MSAAC) at the School Administration Building in Ashburn, covered everything from full-day kindergarten, to tax rates, to mental health to transportation.

Taxes and public education

A constituent asked the panel if they're concerned that Loudoun's high tax rate may hamper businesses from coming to the county.

Supervisor Kristen Umstattd (D-Leesburg) said investing tax dollars in education will help the local economy in the long run.

"Corporations understand that employees won't move unless the public schools are the best they can be," said Umstattd. "In fact, if we cut spending to LCPS, it would hurt business. If you talk to any chamber of commerce, they will tell you the same thing."

Another community member asked the School Board if they feel any responsibility to taxpayers when amending and approving the budget.

"We do have a duty to taxpayers, but our first responsibility is to educate children," said School Board member Beth Huck (At Large.) "I feel good about the budget we approved last night. We listened to parents and added some things they wanted and took out other things as well."

School Board member Joy Maloney (Broad Run) pointed out that the adopted budget is less than the amount projected by LCPS at the end of last year.

Full-day kindergarten

A member of the audience asked the School Board why it is putting so much funding toward expanding 2DK when needs caused by constant growth, like overcrowded classrooms, are affecting the rest of the student population.

School Board member Jill Turgeon (Blue Ridge) said that she voted against adopting the school's operating budget for that reason.

As Seen IN PRINT

"I see the needs of students day to day. Many concerns have not been addressed," she said. "Our class size is the third highest in the D.C. area. I think our gifted education program underserves right now. I think we're struggling in our ELL (English Language Learners) program."

Turgeon said she isn't against expanding FDK, but if the school system is spending \$10 million on one program, it should be a program that will impact all the students, not 35 percent of one age group.

Supervisor Chair Phyllis Randall (D-At Large) pointed out that numerous studies show the academic and social benefits of FDK.

"I am fully in support of FDK and always have been," she said. "We are one of only three counties in the commonwealth without FDK and the only one without a plan."

School Board member Debbie Rose (Algonkian) said more parents are coming forward to say they don't want their students to have FDK. The board member said she supports retaining a half-day kindergarten option for those who feel their children aren't ready for a full day of class.

"Kindergarten is an option period," Randall responded. "You don't have to take it at all."

Student health and school safety

An audience member asked the panel what is being done to expand information sharing about mental health services in the county and its schools.

"This is something that is very important to me because of personal experience and recent events in our community," said Turgeon, breaking down in tears. "When a child is in a mental health crisis, the entire family is in a mental health crisis. I think we need to focus on supporting our students and families going through these crises."

Turgeon added she is meeting with Randall soon to talk about providing a well-established channel of information from schools to families about mental health services already available.

Randall, who worked as a mental health therapist for 25 years, said the issue is also very important to her.

"Sometimes we forget that mental health is health," she said. "We need to remember that substance abuse is also a mental health issue. If we keep the stigma and shame around these issues, people will lie from it."

A parent asked the School Board if enough is being done to prevent a mass shooting in Loudoun's schools.

School Board member Jeff Morse (Dulles) said student safety is an enormous concern. He pointed out the board added funding to the budget to restore full-time principals at four small schools in western Loudoun for student safety reasons.

"That being said, we cannot prevent mass shootings," he said. "We do the best we can with the resources provided. There is nothing that can be done by LCPS that isn't already being done."

Randall said while mass shootings can't be prevented, the first lines of defense are in the home, the family and the neighborhood. She urged parents to be vigilant of changes in their children's behavior and to take them seriously.

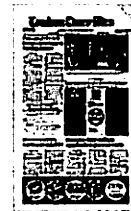
Diversity staffing and achievement gaps

An audience member pointed out LCPS has never hired a black football coach and there aren't any athletic female directors.

"We just last night added a personnel specialist for diversity," said Maloney. We will continue to look at our workforce and how we can make it more diverse. This is a problem facing us nationwide, not just in LCPS. But when you hear about the history of this issue here, it's definitely concerning for Loudoun County."

Supervisor Suzanne Volpe (R-Algonkian) said the county is making a strong push to ensure employees are reflective of the community.

Another parent asked the School Board what is being done about the minority achievement gap among students.



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Surgeon said she's seen the gap first-hand in the classroom. Disadvantaged students or students without support at home don't always have equal opportunities, she said.

"That's why I pushed to have an la carte program at the Academies of Loudoun, so any student can take a course at the Academies, even if they are not enrolled in the school," she said. "We want to give them every opportunity to shine."

Consolidating county buildings

An audience member asked the supervisors if they would look at consolidating the spread out of county offices into one building to better serve the community.

Volpe said the issue is a sensitive one for her, admitting that it is "ridiculous" to have components for family services spread out miles apart in four different buildings.

She suggested the county's land at Moorefield Station might be optimal to build the 400,000-square-foot office space the county needs.

"This is a problem, created a long time ago," added Randall. "In the past, the county approved so much development without the infrastructure for it and now we're playing catch up. The people sitting up here didn't approve those houses, but it is now our responsibility to deal with the growth."

Transportation

A community member asked the supervisors if public transportation services in the county will be improved.

"I hope so," said Randall. "We have a lot of transportation issues in Loudoun."

Randall added that she is in favor of offering commuter buses from the western end of the county into the east.

"Multi-model transportation doesn't just mean build more roads," she said. "It means having more options like buses and bike routes."

Comments

Fri, Feb 05 at 12:40 AM by doeyjune | Report this comment

- 66 As the parent of a rising kindergarten student, I would very much like to see the studies that show the advantage of full day kindergarten. If the data shows a definite long-term benefit, then by all means implement full day kindergarten. However, even my 5-year-old knows that it's idiotic to do something "just because most everybody else is doing it."

Thu, Feb 04 at 02:40 PM by David Dickinson | Report this comment

- 66 They should do this regularly. These interactions are most beneficial and it gives citizens the feeling that they have a voice.

Town/City of Leesburg. It sounds like you blew it.

Thu, Feb 04 at 01:17 PM by Virginia SGP | Report this comment

- 66 Not a bad summary but I think they missed one of the first 2 questions. I asked the BOS if they would advocate the school board adopting an ethics pledge as the BOS has done given that the LCSB chairman works for a billionaire charter school owner and votes on charter schools in Loudoun County. Despite basing her campaign largely on her "ethics pledge", Phyllis Randall piped up to say she didn't even have an opinion on the issue. In fact, it was a "set up" question and such pledges were not meant to "bludgeon" officials over the head.

Question: if officials aren't expected to follow the conflict of interest law and

disclose conflicts pursuant to their pledges, what good are ethics pledges? Apparently, Phyllis Randall thinks it's perfectly acceptable for Hornberger (who wasn't in attendance) to continue to violate the COIA law on multiple fronts. But one thing Randall disapproves of is public criticism!

You see, I posted Randall's comments on Facebook pages last night (LEAP, others). Randall quickly blocked me from her own official BOS page. That violates at least 2 constitutional amendments. Fortunately for Randall, LCA Plowman gets his turn in court first (federal that it so Irby can put her canned dismissal rulings away). Expect something next week Jimmy.

As to the rest of the items for discussion:

1. Maloney put out her best propaganda. LCPS submitted its best "wish list" in the summer of 2015 for the FY17 budget. Everybody said it was just a possible list of items but now Maloney wants to take credit for a "cut". Nonsense. And one of the main cuts was a gift of \$9M to spread around their administrator salaries. I showed this was 1.8x just the step increases those administrators would get and suddenly that gift disappeared. It also included a line item of \$16.8M for employee step increases. When my FOIA request showed that was grossly overestimated, LCPS calculated the accurate number of \$10.4M -> a \$6M+ drop. So removing that error, Joy, LCSB actually increased the budget from Jun-2015. And if you add the \$2M of fake cuts, it's even worse. Are you sure you are a STEM worker?
2. Randall was misleading the public about studies showing the effects of FDK. Excluding disadvantaged kids, none of the studies show any benefits. In fact, Finland and many US advocates recommend starting school at 7 yrs of age. The most recent RAND Corp says there are no discernible benefits and math proficiency actually may drop by 5th grade with FDK. Notice that Randall never mentions an actual study just the mythical "many studies reveal" allegation. I wonder what Randall's college major was.
3. If Umstattd is so interested in the quality of the schools, why doesn't she join President Obama, fmr Sec of Education Arne Duncan and current Sec of Education John King in recommending VAMs to evaluate our schools. Turns out Fairfax is much better than we are. We don't have many ESLs or FRLs so our raw averages tend to be higher. But our growth sorely lags. We have the data but LCSB violates federal law by ignoring it. Kristen, demonstrating to corporations student growth and performance on exams like PISA would do more to encourage their move to Loudoun than anything else.
4. If Randall thinks the solution is more "bike routes" why doesn't she ride a bike to work?
5. Kudos to Volpe for mentioning what everybody knows. Nobody outside Leesburg residents want to go to the cluster that is King and Market. Move the county offices out of Leesburg please!!!!

I thought overall it was entertaining. Maybe we should have more but I'm guessing LCSB and BOS members will be hesitant to attend. Many can't seem to keep themselves out of legal trouble whenever they open their mouths to answer public questions, right Brenda Sheridan? I have a solution for you, though. Tell the truth and follow the law and you never have to worry about a given statement will hurt you. Ever!

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